

44 Years of History - First Presbyterian Church

by Betty K Phipps, member

Thank you for inviting me to share tidbits from the archives of First Presbyterian church, focusing on the first 44 years of our history, warts and all. My information comes primarily from minutes of the Session which serve as the oldest records of our church. The earliest Session minute book that we have begins in 1858, 34 years after the founding of the church. We do know that a delegation was sent to Presbytery in 1840. The 2 pages of church records submitted to that body were criticized for being inadequate. Obviously, record keeping was not our strong suit. The earliest information we have comes from an 1877 history written by the Rev. Jacob Henry Smith, which contains information that must have come from documents that predate 1858. It is possible that those records were lost in a fire – at Mrs. Smith's home or Charles Myers' home. As I proceed, you will hear things you don't agree with. I hope you will remember that our members were people of their time and reflected the ways things were. While we may not condone some of their opinions, actions, or language, we also should not condemn them. Instead we should learn from their mistakes and build on and improve the legacy they left. End of sermon.

While our name is First Presbyterian Church, we were not the first church of our denomination in Guilford County. Buffalo, organized in 1756 and Alamance organized in 1764, called the famous David Caldwell to be their minister in 1765. His salary was \$200 a year and he traveled back and forth between the two sites on horseback. Caldwell was truly a Renaissance Man. Yes, he was a preacher, but he was also an educator, a self-taught physician, a farmer, a carpenter and a statesman. His Log College (1767-1820), which operated for 53 years produced 5 governors, c. 50 ministers, and numerous judges, lawyers and physicians. Today you can visit the site of that Log College – the David and Rachel Caldwell Historical Center at the corner of Hobbs and Cornwallis, next to the Bicentennial Park. One of those ministers who attended the Log College was our founding father, William Denny Paisley.

Paisley grew up worshipping at Alamance Presbyterian and after attending David Caldwell's Log College, he became a minister and a teacher. He served as pastor to several churches in what is now Alamance County and operated an academy while at Hawfields. In 1816, he became minister at Bethel Presbyterian Church

near McLeansville (they are very proud of that fact!) and moved to Greensboro in 1820 to run the Greensboro Academy for Males, a school that had been chartered 4 years earlier. A companion school for girls was opened by his daughter. The Paisley family joined Buffalo Church, there said to be only one professing Christian in Greensboro at that time! So, why are we First Presbyterian?

Let's pause a moment to think about Greensboro in 1820. The town was chartered in 1808, the year James Madison, our 4th president, was elected. The site for a county seat had been chosen in the exact center of the county, actually the swamp across Elm Street which became east Fisher Park, and then moved to drier ground. It was one mile square with 4 streets – North, South, East and West – with the courthouse in the middle where the 4 streets converged. Today we travel these same streets when we drive down North and South Elm Street or East and West Market Street. Around 2 dozen families became the early residents.

At the Academy Paisley began holding worship services which attracted local Residents. The result was our church, perhaps the first church in town. On October 3, 1824, the Presbyterian Church was organized with 12 charter members – 8 white, 2 men and 6 women, and 4 slave, 1 male and 3 female. Those members included Mrs. Paisley, the Paisleys' 2 daughters and 3 slaves. Our founding minister owned slaves. Although never called to the pastorate, Paisley remained our minister for 20 years.

The church continued to hold services at the Academy and the membership remained small. But in 1831, 20 white and 6 African American were received as members. Early members were often transfers from Buffalo and Alamance. One of those transfers was Jesse Lindsay, who according to legend, found the horseback or carriage ride from his home to Buffalo too long. Wonder if he was overcommitted or just liked to sleep in on Sunday mornings? He donated land for a building at what is now the intersection of Summit Avenue and Lindsay Street. Lindsay's gift was timely, for in 1830, the Female Benevolent Society was organized to raise funds to build a sanctuary. There was an initiation fee of 25 cents, with weekly dues of 5 cents, and the members maintained a donation box for items that could be sold. In addition, they agreed to take in sewing. Sometimes it just takes a woman to get the ball moving!

Two years later, we had a sanctuary. Picture this: A 1 story brick box, 40 feet long and 30 feet wide, with 2 entrances – one for men and the other for women. It was heated by an open fireplace. Perfect for our 38 members!

Father Paisley continued to serve the congregation as long as his health permitted. He was followed by the Reverend John M. Gretter, who had come to Greensboro to teach math at the Caldwell Institute. This school, organized by Orange Presbytery in 1833, was not David Caldwell's Log College or the Academy where Paisley taught. It attracted students from all over the south and as many as 100 attended services at the Presbyterian church on any given Sunday. It was later moved to Hillsborough after a typhoid outbreak in Greensboro, but never flourished there and soon closed. Gretter was the first minister called by this congregation.

A native of Virginia, Gretter was a graduate of UVA, and earned his ministerial credentials from Princeton Theological Seminary followed by study with his local minister in Richmond. While teaching at Caldwell, he was recruited to help Paisley, and was so well liked by this congregation that they called him as their minister when Paisley retired. He was formally installed as Pastor in 1844. By then the congregation had grown to 72 members and was beginning to feel a little crowded in the small sanctuary. They decided to build a second church building on the same site. This church also brick, was 64 feet deep and 44 feet wide with a lecture room on the north side. There were galleries, or balconies, for "colored people." The building could seat 500 and the total cost was a whopping \$23,000. Three years later a pipe organ was installed, the first in Greensboro.

During these early years, elders took their responsibilities very seriously. For example, they issued citations to members to appear before the Session to respond to rumors of conduct reflecting on his/her Christian character. They also suspended indefinitely from the church members who were found "wanting" until such member showed repentance through a change in life style. If the misconduct were public and flagrant, the pastor was directed to read aloud the Session's action from the pulpit. Church officers were not exempt from the expected standards of behavior. In fact one elder left town with his family when he was publicly censured for not returning \$100 he had borrowed from a poor widow!

The Session met monthly – some things never change – on the first Monday of the month. But rather than delegating various tasks to a myriad of committees as we do today, they added Saturday afternoon meetings on the day before

Communion and often before or after Sunday worship services and Wednesday night prayer meetings to welcome new members. And after 1849 they occasionally met jointly with the deacons to discuss finances and would often send a “committee of one’ to call attention to needed fence repairs or repairs to floor coverings.

According to by-laws adopted in March, 1841, only men with the proper credentials would be allowed in the pulpit. There would be no women “under all circumstances.”

Once again, in 1858, the church faced a leadership crisis. Gretter’s health was not good and in 1853 he died at the age of 42. In his memory his father presented the church a silver communion service composed of 2 silver goblets, 2 silver plates, and a tankard to be used by the church as long as it remains Presbyterian. You can see one of the silver goblets on display at the Greensboro History Museum. Several other men followed Gretter for brief stints. Then in 1859 the congregation called the Reverend Jacob Henry Smith from Charlottesville, VA. The congregation was now 180 members strong.

What a tumultuous time in the history of our church and of our country! Abraham Lincoln was elected president the very next year, followed by the secession of South Carolina, the secession of the other southern states and the Civil War.

When the Smiths arrived in Greensboro, Mary Watson Smith, the pastor’s wife, described their first impressions in a letter to her sister. She wrote, “Our dear old church with its adjacent lecture room lifted its spire heavenward on its present site and stood solitary and alone, the leading landmark of Greensboro... And here, as the voice of praise and song floated upward, gathered weekly the earnest, the loyal and devoted membership of the Presbyterian Church.” “Sunday morning when we got to church, we found a congregation calculated to inspire any minister; one side of the balcony was crowded with colored people, the other with young men (from Caldwell Institute perhaps) and the body of the church filled with all ages and conditions.” She then complimented the music. “The organ commenced a most beautiful voluntary. The singing was splendid, one of the fullest and finest choirs I ever heard.” Sound familiar? And she concluded, “The congregation was fully as large at night, a great many colored people could not get in.”

It was not long before Smith's diary reflected the political turmoil around them. "I fear that fanaticism will accomplish its end in sundering of this mighty and glorious union. The war of abolition fanatics is beginning to produce its results." He read the secession declaration from South Carolina and concluded that it was able and convincing. His wife, however, was a little slower to embrace the confederacy. Early in 1861 she wrote her sister, "I see you are a secessionist! I have been firm for the union and am still..." Just a month before NC seceded, Mary Smith reported that the people of Greensboro remained strong unionists. A year later sentiments had changed. She recalled, "A central room was established where quilting and sewing were done. Every piece of old linen was cherished and scraped, bandages made, carpets taken up and old bedding, blankets, clothing and food was sent" to the Confederate troops. The war brought escalating inflation to the South and to Greensboro, along with epidemics, including yellow fever in Wilmington, when young men were exposed to new germs. The women responded. Railroad cars coming through town were "crowded with sick and convalescent soldiers vacating hospitals...." Wrote Mary Smith, "The ladies go regularly and pass through the cars with wine, buttermilk, and all sorts of provisions."

Meanwhile at a prayer meeting in April of that year, 1861, Smith wrote that he delivered an exhortation on the present state of things. I expressed myself freely about the villainy of Abraham Lincoln." And in a letter to her sister, Mary Smith confided that "Mr. Smith is well but thoroughly stirred up about the state of the country. He told me the other night that he was fairly burning to enlist, he didn't believe he could stand it much longer. I can hardly trust him to go to the depot to hear the news."

Smith purchased his first revolver and began visiting local militia companies in the field. And when the presbytery set up a ministerial rotating schedule of campsite visits, Smith was among the first to volunteer. In July 1863, he headed out for Lee's army, spending most of his time at Winchester among the wounded from Gettysburg. "Such a visit reveals the horrors of war, the suffering of our men, and the vandalism of our enemy," he wrote. On that trip alone, he preached 14 or 15 times.

The congregation was not willing to relinquish its minister to the Confederacy on a permanent basis, but did vote to donate the church bell to be melted down and converted into bullets for the use of the Confederate soldiers. A Resolution dated April 7, 1862 states: "Resolved that in obedience to the expressed will of the

Congregation, we do most cheerfully make an unconditional tender to the Confederate Government of our church bell, and that the Clerk of Session is hereby ordered to carry out the wishes of the Congregation and Session as early as practicable.”

In addition, they authorized the Session to offer the building to the cause if and when needed. That need came at the end of the war, March 17-May 6, 1865, after the Battle of Bentonville when the building was one of many in Greensboro used as a hospital for wounded soldiers. On Sunday, March 12, 1865, Jacob Henry Smith was notified that the church buildings along with the Methodist Church, the Odd Fellows Hall, the Brittain’s Hotel, Garrett’s Building would be impressed for sick and wounded soldiers. Our church would be the last building filled.

In a 1919 reminiscence, Mary Smith described the scene. “On that night the wounded were brought to Greensboro in such numbers as to fill the Court House, churches and every available space in town. To that call the women of Greensboro responded nobly and with one accord. All else was forgotten as with eager hands and tender hearts they sought to make the poor fellows comfortable in their hastily improvised beds and comfortless quarters.... In the old Presbyterian Church and Lecture Room, I saw the 1st wounded and dying men, and witnessed the grief of their comrades.

The Smith’s son Harry, who was 6 at the time, also had vivid memories of the church as a hospital. He later wrote, “Each soldier was placed on what might be called a board – several planks together into a platform about 4X7 feet. The patient lay on a blanket and was covered with another. These boards were laid across the pews and the nurse standing between the pews found her patient easily reached and at the right level for feeding and other attendance. Mother took me each morning to help carry water, towels, food, etc. My first trip on entering was to go to the pulpit and see how many had died during the night. Each dead soldier was wrapped in a blanket and laid in front of the pulpit, the number ranging from 4 or 5.

His mother was less matter -of -fact.” When I went back the next morning, death had set its seal on many a noble form as they lay in a semi-circle around the pulpit, in the last long sleep that knows no waking nor rude alarms of war. But more pitiful than all was the absence of anesthesia. Yet, in this painful lack of equipment, the ingenuity and self-sacrifice, the sympathy and resourcefulness of our women made what amends were possible.”

Throughout the war, Jacob Henry Smith remained concerned about his country. From his final diary entry for 1861: "How full of mighty events has this year been accorded and the war is still existing – the US ruptured – 2 nations formed and at war, nearly a million men under arms in the land. Fanaticism and infidel abolition have produced it and are continuing it – but it is obliged to terminate ere long in the acknowledged indefensiveness of the Confederate states and I fear in financial and commercial and manufacturing resources of the North. It will injure both, but it is folly and madness and wickedness for the North then to proceed against the South. The Heavens do vote, however, and good will finally come out of all this war and darkness.

And Three years later: "Last day of the year – war prospects look gloomy Can it be that we fall in this struggle – is all our suffering, sacrifices and blood not to secure our own independence? I do believe we had the right to separate from the Union and there were sufficient causes for it If God wills their (slaves) freedom...as far as I can see it will be the ruin socially, physically and eternally...of 90% of the poor negroes. The Lord have mercy upon them and us and our enemies."

Three days later, he confessed in his diary that "Articles in the Richmond and Raleigh papers almost make me feel our cause of Southern Independence hopeless with or without slavery I would rather go for a return to the Union."

Like many southerners of the time, the pro slavery Smiths had servants but cared for them as people. Consider the story of Warren Logan. Warren was the son of Pocahontas, a slave-house servant of the Smith family who had been given as a wedding gift to Mary Smith by her father. As you would expect, the Smith home reflected the high education level of the adults and they placed a priority on education for their children. According to son Henry Lewis Smith, who was later president of Davidson and Washington and Lee, he and Warren were playmates growing up. When Henry studied in the dining room, the door was open to the adjoining dishwashing pantry. Warren would listen, was interested and came in as soon as his chores were done. He learned quickly, went on to Hampton Institute where he became friends with Booker T. Washington, who later invited him to help at Tuskegee. Washington claimed this helper became the "builder of Tuskegee." The Smiths followed his career and were always delighted when he came by on visits to Greensboro.

On a similar note, we learn that in 1864, Bettie (Mrs. Scott's servant) and Tom (Col. J.T. Morehead's servant) were married by Mr. Smith in the family dining room. Quite a large number of white ladies, near neighbors, were present.

By the end of 1864, the South was losing hope. Jacob Henry Smith wrote in September, "The political and military skies are universally dark... things look gloomy all around. And as 1865 began, he wrote in January, "Fort Fisher has fallen, Wilmington will go next.... Great despondency prevails nearly all minds.... I think our people are about conquered." News in February and March was no better as Sherman advanced to Columbia and then Fayetteville. Mary's uncle came through Greensboro from Richmond in March and reported imminent defeat. The South was out of food, munitions and manpower.

By April 11, 1865 there were rumors of Lee's surrender. Jefferson Davis arrived in town, fleeing the Union troops, with Sherman and Confederate General Joseph Johnston negotiating a surrender at Bennett Place near Durham. The assassination of Lincoln on April 19th just added to the gloom. Smith wrote, "I do trust in the Lord and I feel calm and assured. The Lord Reigneth."

On April 20th (1865) Federal troops took possession of Greensboro, 30,000 strong, with General Cox commanding. According to Mary Smith, "Greensboro was fortunate in having at her helm a Christian gentleman and a Presbyterian elder; General Cox ruled fairly and well. In all cases of trespass and complaint, he was reasonable and just. Guards were furnished to any family on request – and indispensable they were whenever spring onions dared appear."

"On Sunday morning, May 7th a mounted officer came early, bringing orders to my husband to preach at the usual hour at the little Baptist Church. As we passed along, every street, store and door-way and corner were crowded with federal troops, and the whole world looked blue in union with our feelings that bitter morning. I sat throughout the service in blinding tears, not only because of our humiliation, but lest in sermon or prayer, some word might escape from the turbulent heart of our speaker to cause his arrest.

After its regularly scheduled meeting on May 17, 1861, the Session rarely met for the next few years. When church business came up, it was discussed wherever the elders happened to be – in a store or shop or on the street. By common consent, not official action, collections were suspended, especially after Confederate currency became worthless.

On May 14, 1865, the Congregation was back in its own sanctuary for the first time after its use as a hospital. According to Smith, the congregation that day was large and attentive with many federal officers and soldiers present. The text that day? "Though the Lord is high, yet he hath regard for the lowly!"

From the beginning the church had assumed responsibility for all members, and that included the growing number of African Americans in the congregation. Once these members were free, however, the session decided that activities should reflect what the people needed, not what their owners preferred. As is typical of this body, a committee was appointed to investigate and discern what the church should do regarding the religious instruction of the "colored people" and to report back at the next Session meeting. In their report, they concluded that the freedmen wanted instruction for their children and they preferred that their former masters do the teaching. Thus, the committee recommended forming a Sabbath School for the moral and religious improvement of everyone who wanted to attend. They concluded that if the freedmen chose not to come, "the responsibility for their continued ignorance is transferred from us to them." They went on to recommend that the Session appoint a Superintendent and organize a Sabbath School as soon as possible. The first man appointed Superintendent declined the job, so a second person got the nod. Each elder was directed to attend one session of the school each month. Teachers were volunteered, but 2 years later the school was closed for lack of attendance. Interestingly, the questionnaire that year for the Annual Report of the Session to Orange Presbytery asked: Have you a Sabbath School in your church for both white and colored children?

Later that same year, 1866, the Session heard a motion to allow the use of the lecture room every Thursday night for the freedmen to gather for a prayer meeting. The motion was approved. 2 years later, 1868, the Session learned that all of the "colored" members except Sibbie Moderwell had organized themselves into a separate church. St. James was established.